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CASTRO DENIES CUBAN-NORIEGA CONNECTION

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Cuban President Fidel Castro denied in an interview broadcast Monday that he received intelligence information on the United States from Panama's military chief, and said the charges stem from a "dirty war" against Panama.

Castro responded to charges published in The New York Times that cited U.S. intelligence sources who said Panamanian military chief Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega had served as a double agent for Cuba and the United States over the past 15 years.

"Never has Noriega transmitted intelligence information to us about the United States, never," Castro told Panamanian journalist Norma Nunez Montoto in a television interview broadcast Monday night.

"I absolutely cannot accept the idea that Noriega, on the other hand, transmitted information on Cuba because Noriega never tried to plant hostility between the United States and Cuba."

The New York Times and NBC News have reported that Noriega was involved in arms and drugs trafficking, had directed the death of an opposition figure, and had orchestrated election fraud.

During the half-hour interview, Castro blamed the U.S. government for the reports, saying, "One thing is very clear, there's a conspiracy against the (Panamanian) National Guard and against Gen. Noriega. It is what we can call the dirty war against Panama, against the National Guard, against Gen. Noriega."

Castro said the campaign began during a meeting of the U.S. National Security Council and that the Pentagon initially opposed it as "uncivilized." He said the campaign had the backing of the White House, the State Department and the CIA.

"The instrument they used is something they use often: alleged leaks to the press, alleged leaks of alleged facts, of alleged information," he said.

Castro said the purpose of the campaign was to discredit the military and create political turmoil so the United States would not have to turn over control of the Panama Canal in the year 2000 as stipulated by treaties signed in 1977.

"If the United States manages to destabilize the country, if the United States manages also to divide the National Guard, then the Canal will not be recovered (by Panama) in the year 2000," said Castro.

Castro said accusations that Noriega served as a double agent playing the United States and Cuba off against each other were aimed at "creating resentments and suspicions" between Panama and Cuba, and that "those measures do not prosper with us."

Contrary to the news reports, Noriega "always tried to be aware of any possibility of a betterment of relations between the United States and Cuba."